Luci PETROVIĆ

REFUGEES

Luci Petrović (née Mevorah) was born in Belgrade on October 12, 1925, the younger daughter of Moša Mevorah and Vida (née Kapon). By 1941 she had completed five of the then standard eight grades of high school. After the war she completed secondary school and subsequently graduated from the Faculty of Law at Belgrade University. In 1946 she married Slobodan Petrović, with whom she has a daughter, Radmila, a chemist and conservation consultant to the Serbian Archives.

Her parents emigrated to Israel in 1949 with her older sister Ester, an architectural engineer.

After working for two years in the Social Insurance Bureau, from 1952 she worked in the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia until her retirement on January 1, 1993.

Luci Petrović had a strong emotional and professional connection to the Jewish community throughout these forty years in which she performed a large number of assignments and served in a wide variety of functions. She was an employee of the Commission for Museum-Historical Activity, later the Jewish Historical Museum, and then an officer of the Cultural Activities Commission. From 1965 she was secretary of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia and a member of the organisation's executive. She was a member of the editorial committee of the Jewish Chronicle from 1958 and took over the role of editor-in-chief after the death of David "Dale" Levi

in 1978, retaining it until the final edition in 1990. She has been an editor, contributor and member of the editorial committee of a number of the Federation's publications. Throughout this entire period until the present she has been a member of the Commission for Museum-Historical Activity. As a token of recognition of her long service to the Jewish community, the Federation planted a grove in her name in Israel in September, 1991.

FEAR

The memory of my six months in Belgrade under German occupation is a nightmare of never-ending fear and misery. Belgrade is my home town, but now I don't recognise it. There is destruction all around and fierce enemy soldiers with helmets and guns and short, broad military boots. I am afraid of them. I wear a yellow band on my arm and walk along the street with head bowed, not wanting to glance at the walls with their posters insulting Jews in words and pictures. On some of them I recognise the work of my favourite painter, Stojanović, whose illustrations I used to enjoy in my children's books. The trams all carry a large sign "No Jews, Gypsies or dogs" in both Serbian and German. The fear and the misery never leave me, even in my own house, the

One of the posters which was stuck all over the walls of Jewish houses in Belgrade in 1941. It reads: "JEWS have been through this forest"

home which used to be so warm. My father is now a German prisoner of war. Will Moša Mevorah, that gentle Jew, survive behind barbed wire in the heart of Germany? Every day is filled with the fear of wondering whether my sister and my uncle will come home in the evening from their forced labour. My mother is 45 and I am 15, so the decree about working doesn't apply to us. The German army has used our carpets and other belongings to furnish their officers' apartments in Dedinje. People with yellow armbands come and carry them out on their backs. One of them whispers to my mother that he'll tell her where it is all taken to. My mother waves him away: we no longer need anything. She is sorry for these people, our companions in misery. Nedić's Serbian State Guards forage through the house looking for anything left: men's shirts, bed linen and the precious stocks of sugar and oil, plunging their bayonets into mattresses and pillows as they pass. We suspect that the shooting of the first hundred hostages – our cousins and friends among them – is the beginning of the end. The keening and wailing of their bereaved families as they stumble together down Dušanova Street turns the blood in my veins to ice. We are joined by convoys of Jews from Banat. The men are taken to the Topovske Šupe camp, the women and children are billeted in Jewish households. There are a mother and daughter from Petrovgrad with us. The community in our house expands, but our hopes for survival shrivel. Our only remaining privilege is to sleep in our own beds. And in the dark of our dreamless nights it is exactly that miserable remnant of our former life which spurs our feverish urge to run, run, run away.

FRIENDS

They don't look the other way. Marija Đorđević, my class mistress and German teacher, comes to see if she can be of any help and whether we need anything. Our friends visit us, laden with groceries, knowing that Jews are allowed to shop only after 10.00 a.m. when nothing can be found in the markets of starving Belgrade. Luka from Hercegovina, a porter at the Jovanova market arrives uninvited. "You're going to tell me now what to bring you from the market tomorrow and we're going to do this every day," he tells my mother brusquely. And then "Now listen, woman, get out of here! Keep those two children safe for that slave in Germany!" Luka can't imagine how he has touched our hearts in this moment. His only reward is the gratitude in my mother's face. The eld-

est of the Žujović brothers, the only one still in the country, arrives from the village of Nemenikuće under Mt Kosmaj in his village clothes. He wants to take us out of the city immediately to live in his house until the war is over. Can we put these people in danger like this, dragging them with us into misfortune? Milutinović, whose Lamiko pharmacy is known to everyone in Belgrade for its advertising slogan "Lamiko – Death to Corns", offers to register my mother as his refugee sister from Bosnia and legally adopt my sister and me. It is brave and humane of him, but impossible in Belgrade, where there are still people who might recognise us.

Nor do our neighbours, the people in our building and our street, look the other way. But our landlord, Gruber, who owns a patisserie, is a *Volksdeutscher*. He was immediately appointed commissioner of the Jewish-owned Katarivas confectionery factory. His Hungarian wife showers us with foul language and threats every time we run into her.

We need courage if we want to escape from Belgrade, and we need money for false documents, money we don't have. The cheapest solution is to get permits for Pristina which state that we are returning to our home town. We have no choice. With great difficulty we somehow manage to get the money and buy the permits. The only one to whom we dare reveal our plan is Luka. We owe him that much. He approves heartily: "Great is God," he tells us. Then, unexpectedly, he takes the initiative. "I'll go to the station to buy the train tickets, then I'll come the night before you leave to take your luggage. I've got friends who are porters at the station, everything will be all right."

On November 3, before dawn, as soon as the curfew is over, Luka leads us through the deserted streets of Belgrade to the open tracks, far away from the main entrance of the railway station. There is a lone wagon standing on the track and we get inside. Our three bags are placed in the rack above the seats. Our wagon is shunted back and forwards and then joins the rest of the carriages. I can see the station and the people getting onto the train, but I dare not peer out of the window because we knew there is usually a police agent, a Jew called Benjaminović, on duty at the station, hunting Jews fleeing Belgrade. Finally, slowly, we depart. The train stops in Ripanj and Luka gets off. He stands outside our window, waving and softly repeating "God is with you, God is with you". We open the window to press his hand in farewell and he suddenly throws a large parcel wrapped in newspaper through the window, it has been under his arm the whole time. As the

train gathers speed and Luka vanishes from our sight, we unwrap the newspaper. Inside is a loaf of fresh white bread and a roast chicken. We haven't even remembered to pack any food.

KOSOVO

We travelled to Kosovo through Niš and Skopje, with two border crossings and thorough checks of our documents and luggage. Each time we were in a panic about being discovered and about whether our documents would protect us. The railway line finished at Kosovo Polje and from there to Pristina we had to travel by horse-drawn carriage. This attracted attention and as soon as we reached Pristina we were approached by a street patrol and asked to show our documents. They immediately arrested us, assigned an armed policeman to us and returned us to Kosovo Polje. We had to spend the night there in a small room behind a tavern, waiting to be returned to Serbia in the morning. The policeman was with us the whole time. The next day we left by train. The other people in our compartment eyed us with suspicion. A few minutes after the train set off, the policeman went to the toilet. A railway employee in our compartment enquired "What have you done? Why are you being escorted by the police?" There was no alternative: my mother told him that we were being returned to Serbia because we were Jews. The railway man began trying to convince us that we should flee the train in Lipljan. We were about to arrive there and the train would stop only for a minute. "Hide behind the station building and wait for the train to leave. I'll throw your luggage through the window," he told us. We weren't used to this kind of adventure, but in desperation, knowing what was waiting for us, we agreed.

The train stopped in Lipljan and we hid behind the station building. We heard our luggage land on the deserted platform and returned to collect it. Then we saw a slim young man walking down the platform, wheeling a bicycle, watching the departing train. As soon as he saw us, the mother and two daughters he was supposed to find, he rushed up to us, saying "Don't be afraid. I'm Jewish. Solomonović. The Jewish community in Pristina sent me here by bicycle to meet the train and shout along the wagons in Judaeo-Spanish "Anyone who is Jewish should get out" (Quen es Giudio que salga). The Jews in Pristina are very upset about you being sent back to Serbia. This is the plan to help you. Unfortunately I didn't get here on time, so it's lucky you're here."

There were two Jewish families living in Lipljan, the wealthy merchant family of Haim and Sara Solomon, and the Baruh family, who were modest farmers. Obviously we couldn't return to Pristina. The plan was for us to stay for a few days in Lipljan with one of these families. Solomonović took us to the Solomons' shop. The family had a spacious house and could easily have hidden us there, but they refused. The Baruh family, however, welcomed us with open arms. It was the Sabbath eve and the house was lit with candles. The grandmother and grandfather spoke only Judaeo-Spanish. The younger ones bustled about, putting out hot beans on the nicely decorated table. Their baby was fast asleep in a cradle, while the older girl, four years old, played with a small boy, arguing with him in Spanish. The little boy was the son of a Serb neighbour and had learned Ladino playing with their daughter. After so many days we again felt the warmth of a home, this home to which they had welcomed us despite the danger we brought with us. After the war we searched for the Baruhs from Lipljan but, to our sorrow, learnt that they had all been killed. We met young Solomonović again in Israel, in Moshav Kidron, where he had become a wealthy man.

The bubble of our optimistic illusion that we would find salvation under Italian rule soon burst. We spent several feverish days in Lipljan searching for a way to get to Prizren. Any kind of travel was fraught with traps and dangers. The Italians, calling their occupation an annexation, gave local power to the Albanians. The main groups wielding this power were the Balists, the Vulnetars, various pro-Fascist groups and agents of Abver and the Gestapo. Our bitter experience in Pristina had shown us that our only hope was to stay hidden and avoid the random checks. Our kind hosts found us a man who took us to Prizren in his truck, hidden in his load. He dropped us off at the house of a family who had agreed in advance to rent us a room to hide in. This was the Serbian part of Prizren, the house of a widow named Lepa Petrović, her son, daughter and elderly mother. Days with no tomorrow began to pass, one after another. My sister and I never left the house. We had no idea what Prizren looked like, not even the street in which we lived. My mother went out to buy food once a week, usually on market day when the streets were full of people from the surrounding villages. She would tie a scarf on her head, disguising herself as an old woman, before she left. But apparently there was still some kind of connection with the Jewish community in Pristina. Once a member of the community visited

to tell us that Agent Benjaminović had been in Pristina. The whole winter we were filled with an evil foreboding and anxiety. On March 14, 1942, the Carabinieri came for us. Obviously our whereabouts were no longer a secret. After being held for a full day at the police station, we were taken to prison, together with another five or six Jewish families who had also been hiding in Prizren. They were brought to the station one by one during the day. We learnt from them that about fifty refugees from Serbia had also been arrested in Pristina and handed over to the Gestapo, who had deported them to Serbia. The news that our cousins, Majer and Matilda Pinkas, were among them shook us deeply. Benjaminović had done his job well. We could only expect more of this in the Prizren prison.

"Smile for the camera!" in Prizren prison.

The men were separated from the women, but during their daily hour of exercise in the prison yard they would come over to our windows and talk to us. We agreed with them that we would send three people as a delegation to ask for a meeting with the local Italian commander. They would explain to the Italian authorities that it would be an act of mercy to shoot us in Prizren if there is an order to hand our group

over to the Germans. In this way we would at least be spared the cruelty of the Gestapo and a painful trip to Serbia where the same end would be waiting for us. The Italian commander accepted this argument and promised that he would not allow us to be sent back to Serbia. He even added that the prison was the best place of concealment for us, but we were reluctant to accept this. After two months we were released from prison as civilian prisoners of war and told we were to be transferred to Albania.

For four long months we had to report every day to the Italian police. We were anxious all this time because we were so close to the border with occupied Serbia. The executive secretary of the Prizren Municipality at the time was Elhami Nimani, whom we had met in prison. He had been arrested because some Fascist bigwig was due in Prizren and they wanted to get everyone suspicious off the streets. He was released before our group. Because he understood the danger we were in, and because he had access to the municipal seals, he made documents for the entire group which certified that we were residents of Prizren. Some of the group wanted false Albanian names with their photographs on the documents and he was even willing to do this. My mother thought this was too great a risk, so we became residents of Prizren under our own names. After the war, Elhami Nimani was an ambassador in the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, and I had a number of friendly encounters with him. He died in Belgrade several years ago.

In September, 1942, all of us were taken in a military convoy to Kavaje.

ALBANIA

At that time, Kavaje was a small township with about fifteen thousand inhabitants, six kilometres inland from Durres. We suddenly found ourselves in a totally foreign country, a country whose culture and civilisation lagged centuries behind our own. We were surrounded by people speaking a language which not only did we not understand but which bore no resemblance to any language we were familiar with. The streets were full of women with veils and men whom we dared not look in the eye, even when we were asking them the price of onions. Even our clothing singled us out from the local population. Women dressed in the European style, without veils, were a rare sight and the men wore white caps on their heads. Little was known about Jews there, because

there were only a handful of Jewish families living in Albania: two families in Durres, a family from Skutari in Tirana and perhaps a few families in Elbasan. But in that spring of 1943, rumours spread through the town that Jews slaughtered children to use their blood for *matsot*, their ritual bread, and that we detainees were those same Jews! The Muslim women hurried their children away from playing in the street with us. This didn't last long, however, and was of no consequence apart from our wounded feelings.

False document certifying that Barije Xhavit Gabaja (Berta Gabaj), daughter of Asan (Avram) and Sanija (Sara), is a Muslim and a citizen of Prizren.

There was a certain sense of relief for us refugees from occupied Yugoslavia in being further away from the German zone of occupation. As civilian detainees, our residence was now legal and our constant panic, the feeling that our very lives depended on what we did next, was eased. The daily reporting to the Italian police and the restrictions on our movement soon became our way of life. At this time there were about twenty Jewish families from various parts of Yugoslavia in Kavaje. We were all responsible for our own food and accommodation. My uncle had lived in Geneva since the first world war and he managed to send money through an Italian friend from time to time, but this was neither regular nor enough. Our day-to-day existence was miserable because of our constant shortage of everything. We lived this way until the capitulation of Italy, which we had heard many rumours about during the early autumn of 1943. Nevertheless, we continued to report to the Italian police every day and sign in. One day we found the duty officer and a military doctor in a state of extreme agitation. "You hear the cannons?" they asked, "You can hear the Germans entering Durres. We'll destroy all the lists of detainees. We won't give them to the Germans. You should hide wherever you can! We'll head for the woods, to join the Partisans."

The Germans occupied Albania in September, 1943, and the German police put up posters ordering all non-Albanians to report to them. Anyone failing to report, and any Albanians harbouring such people, would be executed. This regulation, which stayed in force until the end of the war, was the determining factor in our lives for that period. The people of Kavaje knew about us former detainees so we had no choice but to disappear overnight. Up until then we had shared an unfinished house with two other families, one to each room. The owner of the house was the local teacher and head of the village of Preza. Delighted that our rent gave him the opportunity to finish building his house, he had promised us all sorts of things, and told us we could count on him if we had any kind of trouble. So with nowhere else to go, we now fled to our landlord. Preza was an isolated village in the hills above the Skutari-Tirana road. Our teacher convinced us that the German army moved only along the main roads, not daring to enter the hill country in which there were a lot of armed fighters, as indeed there were in Preza. He put us in a deserted house and would occasionally bring us a little flour and oil and some beans from the village. We were overjoyed to find Dr Moša Đerasi and his family in Preza. He was there

thanks to a friend and university colleague from Vienna, a Greek doctor who had worked in Tirana and had good contacts in the Health Ministry. In order to secure his escape from Tirana, he had had him appointed as the village doctor, concealing the fact that he was Jewish, of course. As the winter closed in, the first snows covered the access roads to the village. We had neither fuel nor a stove. There was no electricity in the village so we used candles or a gas lamp for light. The house was full of mice which we would hear scurrying and squeaking all night. I came down with acute tonsillitis and had a high temperature. We felt helpless. My mother was afraid that the winter would imprison us in these hills and leave us extremely vulnerable.

We left Preza after less than three months. Our protector found a man with a horse and cart who took us to Tirana along the back roads in order to avoid the German guards at the entrance to the town. We were alone in the street and needed a new hole to hide in. Without giving it much thought, we went to our former neighbour from Kavaje, an Italian technician who had sent his family back to Rome after the German occupation. He himself had moved to Tirana, because of his business commitments. He took us in, saying that no one would look for us in his house. At that time the streets of Tirana were terrorised by gangs run by the minister for internal affairs, Xhafer Deva, who had earlier been a Nazi agent in Kosovska Mitrovica. He organised raids in the streets and houses and looted whatever he could get his hands on.

Before long we were arrested in one of these raids and taken to his army barracks. There were already several hundred prisoners there but we three were the only women. Because there were so many of us, we all stood in the yard. Occasionally German soldiers would come and lead prisoners away. Muslim customs forbade we three women being alone among so many men, so each evening they would send us home with an armed guard and return us to the prison in the morning. These were days and nights of panic and madness. On the third night we summoned up our courage and fled through the back door of the house. We had nowhere to go, so we returned to Preza, to our protector, the teacher and head of the village. We were met with the threat that he would personally report us to the German police if we didn't leave Preza and turn ourselves in. Things had changed, he said. We had no idea where to go or what to do.

In despair we decided to take a gamble and seek the help of the resistance fighters who had gathered in the village. These were support-

ers of King Zog and were under the command of Zog's officer, Nu Pali. My mother went to talk to him and confessed who we were, where we came from and what we were running from. He replied that his honour commanded him to help women in need and that he would get us secretly to his native village of Miloti that night and hide us with his brother's family. He set us the strict conditions that we not leave the house and that we not meet anyone. Each of us had to promise him we would obey. The Đerasi family were still in Preza but were prepared to leave. Seeing the noose tightening around the Jews, Dr Đerasi's Greek colleague arranged for him to be transferred to Ljesh, where no one would know him. The route to both villages was in the same direction, along the main road north towards Skutari. We all left together at midnight that night in a truck with about ten of Pali's fighters and his cousin, who would take us to the house. As we came down the hill to the road, we had to pass the strategic intersection at Worre, which was guarded by the German army. Suddenly we stopped, surrounded by armed German soldiers. They asked my mother for her documents. She sat petrified, as though she didn't understand. They began pulling her out of the truck by the arm, shouting "*Los, los!*" We thought it was the end. Suddenly we heard the calm voice of Dr Moša Đerasi explaining in German that he was a doctor, that he had studied in Vienna and was travelling with his family to Ljesh to take up his new post, and that my mother was his sister and we her two daughters. The soldier released my mother and saluted and we continued on our way. I don't know how many people in the world would put their family in jeopardy in order to help someone else. For me, Dr Moša Đerasi will always be the bravest and noblest of men.

The village of Miloti was on a hill dotted with peasant houses. The last house on the top of the hill was the house of the Pali family. Behind the house, slightly uphill, was the small, neglected and dilapidated house which was to be our new refuge. As we entered we had to brush aside thick cobwebs. The building was intended to house both cattle and people. There was no glass in the windows, only wooden shutters, so that when it was raining and cold the house was dark. We prepared our meagre food by lighting dry branches in the middle of the house, where the smoke escaped through the roof. A woman from the Pali family fetched drinking water from a spring seven kilometres away, carrying it on her back in a wooden barrel. Each day she would give us a jug of water. We had no way of protecting our food from the mice and rats.

At night we lay with our heads covered because they would also run across our beds.

In the autumn of 1944, the skirmishes with the German army as it retreated from Greece came closer and closer to Miloti. Explosions and artillery fire could be heard nearby. The village families began evacuating to the valley of the Mat River where they would be safer. The Pali family was prepared to take us with them, but we didn't dare accept this offer because it would break the promise we had given Nu Pali. His cousins in Miloti never found out why they were hiding us. Again we were faced with the dangerous trip to Tirana and uncertainty. The roads were overrun with the retreating German army and bandits taking advantage of the chaos. To this day I don't know how we managed to get through. It was the end of November, 1944.

View from the Window, *Luci Mevorah-Petrović, watercolour. Kavaja, Albania, July 1943.*

The battle for the liberation of Tirana lasted nineteen days as Albanian soldiers seized the town, street by street. Freedom was within our grasp. In the part of the town where we were, people were still losing their lives, houses were being burnt and there was the deafening roar of mortars and other weapons everywhere. We made a desperate bid for freedom. Running and crawling under fire we made it across the

front line and reached the liberated zone of Tirana. Nu Pali was shot by the Albanian Partisans.

Our wonderful relief at having survived the Nazi threat was mixed with complete exhaustion. My brave mother, who had managed to save my sister and me "for that slave in Germany", finally collapsed and fell ill. We had no money, not even to buy the most miserable food. We knew that we were surrounded by everything we could want, but we had no money to buy anything. A piece of cornbread was our only meal for days. We had to reach Belgrade as soon as possible. Fortunately we saw some Yugoslav soldiers in the street. They were heading for Belgrade under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Vidović from Dalmatia, travelling via Durres, Tirana, Elbasan, Struga and Ohrid and from there by the Niš railway. We asked them to take us with them and, for the next week, we were their guests on the trip.

We arrived in Belgrade on January 4, 1945. We had no idea where to go, nor even whether our apartment was still standing. Our first thought was to go to the Jewish Community. Luckily, our people were already there. We were met by the secretary, Moric Abinun, and Bukica Spasić, both of whom were on duty that night. We spent the night in the community shelter, the three of us sleeping in one bed on a straw mattress. The next day we were back in our apartment. We had no news about our father, nor did he know anything about us. In March, 1945, he returned with the first group of prisoners. Our happiness knew no bounds. We were one of the rare families who were united after all the suffering.